

# Lyons Den

FROM HOUSE TO HOME WITH THE MOST  
POWERFUL WOMAN IN CONNECTICUT POLITICS

BY HEATHER O'NEILL PHOTOGRAPH BY KIT NOBLE

SEWAGE IS NOT USUALLY CONSIDERED A SEXY POLITICAL ISSUE. BUT FOR Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives Moira Lyons, this humble platform was the springboard for a 20-plus year political career.

In 1979, when Lyons began picketing the Stamford Sewage Treatment Plant on Magee Avenue, the young wife and mother wasn't looking for a job. She was just looking for a little relief.

"At that point the odor was of such magnitude that you literally could not walk out of your house," she says. "The nearby businesses were losing customers; people didn't want to come there because it was so horrible. I live fairly far away from there and you still couldn't sit out on your porch and or really do anything outside because the smell was so negative that it made you physically ill. It was awful."

In an effort to get the plant to clean up its act, Lyons and her neighbors — mostly women — took to the streets with their placards.

"It was that type of neighborhood," Lyons says. "It was very easy to get people to connect, to get them involved and to get them to go to city hall. We pick-







eted the plant with our little kids; people would have the strollers going back and forth, always a good picture opportunity, as you can imagine.”

The small protest got the attention the women had hoped for and the pollution was cleaned up. Pleased with the outcome and with Lyons’ leadership abilities, her neighbors soon asked her to run for Stamford’s Board of Representatives in 1980. She won the post and served a one-year term.

In 1981, again at the suggestion of her neighbors, Lyons ran for state representative. It was a long shot: Lyons, who was in her mid-30s, was the only woman running in the four-way primary and was not the endorsed Democratic candidate. All three of her fellow candidates were longtime Stamford residents. By comparison, Lyons was newcomer, having moved to Stamford in 1977 when her then-husband, Edward, an economist, took a job at the Stamford-based Champion International Paper Company. She had never even been to Hartford.

Her campaign, in which friends and neighbors volunteered their services, was not sophisticated or expensive.

“It was a real grassroots effort, really just my friends and neighbors coming out to help. I went door-to-door and introduced myself to people in the community. It was pretty simple,” Lyons says, with a laugh. “I was clearly the new kid on the block [and] I think the impression was that I would not win, but — surprise — I won!”

**R**AISED IN TRENTON, NEW JERSEY, LYONS DESCRIBES her childhood as a happy one. “I grew up, I think, in the time of innocence,” she says. “My parents were typical middle-class people. My dad worked [for the State of New Jersey Tax Department]; my mom didn’t. Both of them just had high school diplomas but my dad managed to have this big job. My

**FROM LEFT, LYONS ON HER FIRST BIRTHDAY; WITH HER MOTHER, ETHEL, AND OLDER SISTER, SHEILA; AND AT HER KINDERGARTEN GRADUATION IN 1947.**

adventures of what went on there. They would have lots of their friends over to the house, especially during the summer, and they would all sit around in the evening telling stories or singing songs.”

Lyons says that dinnertime was important in her family, when they would gather around the table to check in with one another and chat. It was around this table that some of Lyons’ political sensibilities were no doubt formed.

“We were not a political family but my father was a wonderful person and an avid reader,” she says. “He was always talking about world events and what was happening in the city and clearly politics was very much a part of that.”

**T**WENTY-ONE YEARS AFTER WINNING HER FIRST ELECTION, Lyons still grimaces a bit when she remembers her first day on the job, her expression reminiscent of a teenager nervously scanning the crowded high school cafeteria, tray in hand, searching for someone — anyone — to eat lunch with.

“The Capitol is just magnificent and the House is just magnificent and I walked in and I was a little late and all the faces kind of turned to look at me. Everyone is looking at me and I am thinking, ‘I don’t know what I am supposed to do. I don’t know where I am supposed to sit. Would somebody please help me so that I don’t really look foolish?’” Lyons covers her mouth with her hand and laughs. “Luckily someone, I think, took compassion on me and showed me where I was supposed to be seated. It was like, ‘Oh my God ... I can’t believe that I am here!’ And clearly at that point I never thought that one day I would be standing up on that dais being in charge of the entire House of Representatives.”

dad, who was a bit older when I was born, had served in World War I, so I heard a lot of stories about the



Dare to dream. As the representative for the 146th District, Lyons has served 11 terms in the House. She was

named deputy speaker in 1993 and was the first woman to be elected House majority leader, serving in that post from 1995 to 1998. In 1999, she became the first woman elected speaker, a first she takes seriously.

“I think it was a special honor, I really do. As a first anything, there is a little added pressure because you are then a role model and people will look at how you handled things, what you did, were you successful, weren’t you?” she says. “But once you have been there for a little bit you just wear the suit, so to speak. You just fit into the skin of who you are.”

Democratic gubernatorial candidate and state Senator George Jepsen, who has known and worked with Lyons for more than 20 years, has seen her develop into a woman with powerful leadership skills. She has, he says, a real talent for seeing a need and getting effective legislation passed to address it.

“Moira is very strong on policy development and what ends up being the finished product is representative of her initiative and hard work,” Jepsen says, citing Lyons’ work on school readiness programs and managed care legislation as examples. “Look, anyone can come up with a small piece of legislation by changing three sentences of an existing law. Not many have the capacity to deal with large pieces of legislation and take them through to the final product. It is very complex to produce a tangible product. It requires balancing input from many legislators and affected constituents as well as a lot of work in balancing egos. Moira has a track record that shows her achievement in this area.”

As speaker, Lyons has championed several issues she believes are important for the people of Connecticut. Last

**LEFT, LYONS ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL IN 1998. RIGHT, LYONS TAKES THE DAIS IN HER FIRST MOMENTS AS SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE IN 1999.**

year, she spearheaded the “Connecticut Transportation Summit 2000: From Gridlock to Growth,” a statewide event to bring the public and private sectors together to chart a new direction for transportation policy. Lyons, Governor John G. Rowland and other legislative leaders appointed an interim Transportation Strategy Board to make recommendations for legislation. Members were chosen for their understanding of the relationship between transportation and economic development and the ways in which high-quality transportation can spur economic development. Lyons’ interest and expertise in transportation issues date back to her tenure as House chairwoman of the Transportation Committee, where she worked to make highways safer and to improve mass transit. As speaker, Lyons has worked to prevent rate hikes for commuters on the Metro-North Railroad and bus systems across the state.

“Transportation is a major issue, particularly in our area,” she says, citing highway congestion and a shortcomings in the state’s mass-transit system as just some of the problems she sees. “We are focusing on the need to get people to use mass transit, getting freight into [Connecticut], using some of our waterways so that our freight is not necessarily on the roadways. I think those issues are very large issues that will continue to evolve over the next several years.”

Also in 2000 Lyons was recognized by *Good Housekeeping* magazine as one of its “Top Ten Women in Government” for her success in drafting the state’s landmark Managed Health Care Reform legislation. The bill is considered a national model because it created a binding, independent external appeals process for consumers who are denied access to health care by their insurance companies. Under Lyons’ leadership, Connecticut was the first state in the nation to adopt





such legislation.

“The Managed [Health] Care Reform bill was very important because we were one of the first states that

ever did anything [to hold] managed care to have accountability,” she says. “[The bill] makes sure that patients are able to have medical decisions made by their doctors.”

Getting the bill passed into state law was particularly challenging because many insurance companies — among them Oxford, Cigna, Aetna, ConnectiCare and Anthem Blue Cross/Blue Shield — are headquartered in Connecticut. “As the insurance capital of the world, so to speak, this was a shock,” she says. “But we did get it passed. And I have been down to the Capitol since then and explained that since we were able to get it through here, given the fact that so many insurance companies are located here, the tumble effect [in terms of getting the bill passed in other states] should be a bit easier.”

Education is another issue that has been in the forefront of Lyons’ agenda. Over the last three years Lyons has fought for the passage of three programs that provide the foundation for quality education. The “Early Reading Success” program aims to improve the reading skills of children in grades K-3. Lyons cosponsored the “School Readiness” initiative, which provides \$20 million to provide preschool children with skills for future learning. In 1999, Lyons led efforts to pass the “School Accountability” act, which brought an end to the promotion of students who have not acquired appropriate grade-level skills.

“I have always believed that if you give children a chance at the earliest age and identify [learning] problems at the earliest age, as the children get older the problems will dissipate,” Lyons says. “If we can do this, the dropout rate will decrease because the children are given a feeling of confidence. What

**LYONS WITH HER FAMILY; SONS MICHAEL AND DANIEL; AND FRIENDS ELLEN CAMHI OF THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE AND GAIL OKUN OF THE STAMFORD BOARD OF EDUCATION.**

little kid wants to go to first grade and have everyone else reading when he doesn’t know how? That kid is not going to be a success.”

WHILE LEGISLATION IS STILL A TOP PRIORITY, LYONS says her biggest challenge as speaker has been achieving a political balance between her duty to her party and her responsibility to be fair to the entire House, Democrats and Republicans alike.

“Remember good old Harry Truman and ‘the buck stops here?’” Lyons asks, referring to Truman’s famous quip about political responsibility. “Well, it does. [As speaker] you have to deal with everyone on every issue, regardless of party affiliation.”

As a Democrat, Lyons also has had to evoke the spirit of bipartisanship in her relationship with Rowland.

“We are of different parties, the governor and myself, and we have at times different opinions and very strong opinions but I believe we have a good relationship and the ability to discuss issues that may be of differing minds,” she says. “I’ve always felt that a good word to use in politics is balancing. And that is not always easy but part of leadership is the skill of knowing how to balance correctly. That may be the ability to balance services, what revenues are available, or interest groups of very diverse opinions and how to bring [issues] to a final resolution. I think it is something you develop and I believe that it is something that I have been able to develop. Most conclusions that are good are ones that really are in the middle, in that balance.”

Rowland, too, feels that he and Lyons — whose opinions he characterizes as “thoughtful and well-reasoned” — have forged a successful political relationship despite their differing political views and agendas.

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“Representative Lyons and I have developed a very good working relationship,” he says. “While it is true that we often have differing opinions on issues, every year Representative Lyons is willing to sit down with me and discuss those issues in full. We focus on the common ground we have and work forward from that point. I give Representative Lyons a lot of credit for her ability to always bring a variety of perspectives to the bargaining table. There are many varying opinions within her caucus, and somehow she keeps everyone’s opinions in mind during high-level negotiations. To do this requires a great deal of concentration and sensitivity, and she deserves praise for exhibiting these qualities while under pressure. Representative Lyons has always shown a willingness to put aside politics in favor of progress.”

THE BALANCE LYONS SO OFTEN MENTIONS IS KEY TO managing her personal life, as well. Today, Lyons, who divorced Edward in the late 1980s, lives alone in the unassuming home the couple first purchased on Ocean Drive West. Her oldest son, Daniel, now 32, is a civil engineer and Michael, now 30, is a pediatrician at Lackenheath Air Force Base, outside London.

Full of flowers, family photos and comfortable chairs, the house befits its owner, who projects familiarity and comfort despite her powerful position. While most only see her on television, invariably wearing a suit and looking serious, Lyons’ attitude during an interview at her home is casual and approachable.

A typical day starts very early with the hour-and-a-half trip to her offices in the Capitol Building in Hartford and ends late in the evening with the same grueling drive. These days, during the week, Lyons tends to stay in the Hartford condominium of a friend who spends most of the year in Florida.

In between commutes, Lyons spends her free time — which, she laments, she has precious little of — playing tennis and walking on the beach. She also sheepishly admits that she has begun working on her golf game, this year marking her first foray into politicians’ sport of choice.

“[I play] very badly. But it is something that I have been able to do a little bit of in the Hartford area. There are some folks up there who are willing to put up with me and my ineptitude,” she laughs.

What is unusual about Lyons’ life is that while she is partaking of these activities she often is recognized by people who are eager to meet the celebrity in their midst. These meetings usually happen, she insists, when she is having a bad hair day.

“I get recognized more than I would think. I never expect it so

it is always a surprise. [It happens] particularly when you don’t look your best. It’s like ‘Oh my God, they know who I am and I don’t really look good! How could they know who I am?’” she laughs. “But people always have done it in a really nice way.”

DESPITE HER LOFTY TITLE, LYONS HASN’T FORGOTTEN who has kept her in office all these years. She works hard, she says, to perform her duties as speaker without forgetting that her first responsibility is to the people of Stamford.

“I am in a mixed position where my job is representing Stamford and it is clearly also being the speaker of the House, which has a larger purview. I have to look at legislation from both points of view,” she says. “But I believe ... that it is important for the state to have a good partnership with the local communities and that that is done through the representatives’ understanding of what their community needs. It has been a long time [since] Fairfield County has had a person in top lead-

ership and it’s important that people understand how important it is to try to continue that because it really does make a difference for our communities when you have a voice down here and not just in the Hartford area.”

More than anything, Lyons says, what has sustained her through all these years in Hartford are those friends from her Shippan neighborhood who first urged her to run for office.

“I think that clearly the reason for your success is the people you surround yourself with,” Lyons says. “The people that I know who have been in politics and who have moved up and been successful have

had a whole history of connection to a community, being born there, going to high school there, having family there. I was someone who had none of that but what I was fortunate enough to have was a nucleus of friends that were there with me 20 years ago and who are still here with me today. Whenever I go to fund-raisers to ask for support I am embarrassed because it is the same group of people year after year. They don’t want anything from me. They just want to help and they come through for me time after time.”

THE MOST POWERFUL WOMAN IN CONNECTICUT POLITICS insists that her gender has never hindered her career in the male-dominated political arena.

“It is a bit of a good-old-boy network, I am not going to deny it. [But] you have to go about it as bridging that comfort level,” she says, “so that, whether it is business or politics, we are comfortable as people, not just as men and women.”

While Lyons says she has never encountered the glass ceiling in her career, she does acknowledge that others have. “I

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often say to women's groups, I don't look at women's issues as women's issues. I really do look at them as people's issues. But I also believe that I do have a responsibility to recognize that it is a little more difficult for women to climb that ladder. And I do believe I have a responsibility to bring other women along with me who are talented, who should be in a position. Not because they are women, but because they deserve it."

The governor, for one, sees Lyons as more than a role model for women.

"She is a skilled negotiator and respected by her peers for her honesty and intellect," he says. "As speaker of the House, a position that is always in the public spotlight, she has performed admirably and professionally. For this, she is a role model for both men and women."

Lyons demurely deflects questions about whether she plans to run for governor or another higher office in the future, saying only that she intends to run for one last term as speaker. Her concern now, she says, is continuing to be an effective speaker.

Others, including Governor Rowland, see a gubernatorial race as a possibility.

"Representative Lyons is a very credible leader and I would not be surprised to see her run for higher office one day," he says. "She certainly has the capability and the knowledge to remain a force in politics for the foreseeable future. For now, I'm sure she'll continue to do a good job as speaker, and we'll have to wait and see what the future holds."

The governor's comments cement what many in government already know: Lyons has staying power. For her part, the woman who wandered, lost and in awe, through the halls of the House 21 years ago seems slightly amazed that she has built a career with such legs.

"My career just kind of evolved. I had no intention of staying very long. This was never going to be a long-term situation. The years just sort of tumble away from you, in front of you, I guess," she says, fluttering her fingers in front of her, suggesting at once the wonder of the past and the possibilities of the future. ■